
Photo-composite by Allan Amen

*By Lt. Rich Couture*

The day started like any normal one on the boat: I was up early for chow, then off to the ready room for the first brief of the day. I didn't know I would face my hardest decision yet as a new carrier-aircraft-plane commander (CAPC) in the Hawkeye.

We were underway for COMPTUEX, operating in the Puerto Rican Op Area, in late September. I had been a CAPC for a month and had a new pilot in the right seat. For the day's mission, we would launch two aircraft on the same cycle. Our aircraft were to be stationed south of the battle group, with the other aircraft stationed north of the battle group, near Puerto Rico. The weather brief called for thunderstorms in the vicinity. It was a warm fall day, and the freezing level was at 14,000 feet. Since the E-2C has a limited weather-avoidance capability, our goal was to maintain VFR. On the climb-out, it was evident maintaining VFR would be a challenge as we encountered patchy skies and buildups. As we climbed to 23,000 feet, we passed through a small layer while picking our way around the clouds. Eventually, we found an open area that allowed us to station VFR. We could see the water from about 23,000 feet.

After the cycle was complete, the aircraft to the north returned to the ship. However, we were to remain on-station for another cycle. Our mission required us to maintain communications with various units on the beach. Unfortunately, in our current location, we were unable to do this. After talking to the departing Hawkeye, we moved our station to the north, where they had been. That area was clear, with negligible turbulence, and they had good comms with all the organizations on the beach.

We began picking our way north to our new station, but this turned out to be easier said than done. As we tried to find a way around the buildups, we realized the clouds had moved in. There was no way around; the buildups had surrounded us. To get to our new station and complete our mission, it was necessary to punch through the clouds. After the CICO confirmed no traffic was ahead, we entered the least intimidating clouds we could find.

As we entered the clouds at 23,000 feet, the aircraft was clean, and we were doing 170 knots, with the engine anti-ice and prop de-ice on. Approximately five minutes after entering the clouds, the copilot and I noticed ice building on the leading edges of the wings and props. I said to the copilot, "Let's go ahead and turn on the deicing equipment." These are the de-icing boots on the leading edges of the wings, horizontal and vertical stabilizers. As I reached to turn on the de-icing switch, the plane started to sound as though rocks were pummeling it. In 10 seconds, ice completely had covered the wings, props and windscreen. All of a sudden, I sensed the uneasy feeling of the aircraft going into stall buffet.

# Innocent Clouds, or Are They?

I went through the standard procedures for stall recovery. I added power and placed forward-yoke pressure to prevent the nose from pitching up. However, the forward-yoke pressure had no effect. The aircraft nose pitched up to 20 degrees, with the power lever set at MIL. The aircraft started to descend with the nose still pitched up 20 degrees. The VSI indicated 1,000-fpm rate of descent. I pushed the yoke forward, pushed on the rudder pedals, and moved the ailerons left and right, but none of these inputs affected the aircraft. I realized I had no control. Our nose still was pitched up to 20 degrees, we continued to descend at about 1,000-fpm VSI, and our airspeed dropped below 150 knots.

The wing and tail de-ice had run through a complete cycle, no ice was removed. Many different things were going through my head. The most ominous thought was, "At what point, if I have to, do I push the bailout bell?"

As we descended through 22,500 feet, I hadn't controlled the aircraft for about 15 seconds. Since the nose goes up with power additions and goes down with the power off, I decided to pull power, even though we were descending and near the stall buffet. I pulled back the power to idle, and, finally, the nose started to fall through the horizon. The second cycle of de-icing now had finished, and some ice started to come off the wings. As we descended through 16,000 feet, the ice on the wings began to come off more rapidly. We were out of the icing conditions, and I quickly regained control of the aircraft.

As bad as the situation seemed, it wasn't over yet. We leveled off at 13,000 feet to gather our thoughts. We still were in some rain but could see outside and had a visual reference to the water. Things seemed to be getting better when suddenly a bright light lit up the cockpit. Almost immediately, the CICO called from the back-end asking, "Hey, what's going on up there? Our HF radios just went crazy." The CICO then noted a low-torque light on our trailing-wire-antenna control panel. This led us to believe lighting had hit the HF-trailing-wire antenna and the drogue that drags the wire behind the aircraft was lost.

After a long discussion, we went through the procedures for an HF-trailing-wire, low-torque indication. We headed back to the ship, and after landing, took deep breaths and sighed. We had learned more than we wanted on this flight. Icing is nothing to play with, and neither are clouds that look innocent.

Lt. Couture flies with VAW-121.